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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GEORGETOWN 000192

SENSITIVE  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GY](#)  
SUBJECT: DEATH OF FORMER PRESIDENT JAGAN TO HAVE MAJOR  
POLITICAL IMPACT

REF: 08 GEORGETOWN 490

¶1. (U) Summary: Former President of Guyana Janet Jagan died in Georgetown on March 28, at the age of 88. A native of the United States, she married future President Cheddi Jagan in Chicago in 1943, immigrated to Guyana, and became a giant of Guyanese history in her own right. She remained a highly respected and powerful figure in the ruling People's Progressive Party (which she helped found in 1950) until the end, and her passing from the political scene will have considerable impact on the PPP as the 2011 Presidential elections draw closer. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The first female and foreign-born President of Guyana, Janet Jagan, died in Georgetown on March 28, at the age of ¶88. A native of the United States who was born into a Jewish family in Chicago, she met then-dental student Cheddi Jagan in Chicago in 1942, married him, and moved to Guyana permanently in December 1943. The Jagans went on to become the most influential Guyanese political couple for more than a half century. From the days of pre-independence British Guiana, to the successful struggle for independence (achieved in 1966), through several years in the political wilderness during the Burnham dictatorship (1964-85), and culminating in their respective terms as President (Cheddi from 1992 until his death in March 1997; Janet from December 1997 until her resignation for health reasons in August 1999), Janet was universally acknowledged as Cheddi's equal partner. She has thus been dubbed by numerous mourners in recent days as "The Mother of the Guyanese Nation."

¶3. (U) Born just two months after the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution first guaranteed women the right to vote in the United States, Mrs. Jagan was a lifelong advocate of the rights and role of women in society, politics, and government. She was also an avowed Marxist, and remained openly distrustful of the capitalist economic system in her later years. Having experienced what she perceived as persecution by the United States government during the Cold War, she renounced her U.S. citizenship in the 1960s and routinely criticized U.S. foreign policy. In recent years she expressed particular disgust with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, generally vocalizing her opinions through a weekly newspaper column.

¶4. (U) Mrs. Jagan was perhaps best identified as the matriarch of the political party she helped found in 1950, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which has held executive and legislative power in Guyana since Cheddi Jagan was elected President seventeen years ago. Her influence was indisputable and decisive: when Mrs. Jagan resigned from the Presidency in 1999 after just 20 months in power, she engineered the surprising ascension to the Presidency of the 35-year old Finance Minister, Bharrat Jagdeo, who has since been elected to two full terms. She remained a principal powerbroker within the PPP up until her death, having been reelected to her position on the PPP's oligarchic 18-member Executive Committee just last August, and was widely believed

to be the leader of its more hardline, Communist-oriented faction.

¶5. (U) Mrs. Jagan's passing from the political scene has already sparked much debate about the implications for the PPP, particularly considering the looming Presidential elections in 2011 in which President Jagdeo is ineligible to run again due to term limits. Considering the PPP's inherent demographic advantage with its largely Indo-Guyanese support base, the party still stands as the clear early favorite. But the loss of Mrs. Jagan's influence has shaken up the status quo, cementing this as the most wide-open and consequential party nomination contest in Guyanese political history.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The PPP's Executive Committee will make the ultimate decision about who will be the PPP's Presidential candidate, giving the people who sit on the Committee a distinct advantage over those who do not. The two figures to emerge from the party's last Congress in August 2008 (reftel), PPP General Secretary Donald Ramotar and Agriculture Minister Robert Persaud, remain the principal contenders. The leadership vacuum left by Mrs. Jagan's death has left the door open for Ramotar to assert himself more within the party hierarchy, which leads most observers to assume that Ramotar now holds the advantage. But Mrs. Jagan's death could also recalibrate factions in unpredictable ways: will President Jagdeo move closer to the party he ostensibly leads, but from which he has kept some distance recently? This scenario would likely be an advantage to Minister Persaud, Jagdeo's chosen protege. Could Speaker of the National Assembly, party stalwart Ralph Ramkarran, be a potential compromise candidate? Can another possible

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candidate from outside the Executive Committee braintrust find an opening? The race begins anew. End Comment.

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